

New Survey Reveals Needs of U.S.-Mexico Border Groups

By Anne Browning-Aiken, Allison Davis, and Denise Moreno | October 17, 2003

Results of a new survey by the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy suggest that for U.S.-Mexico border activist groups to be more effective in improving environmental, health, and economic conditions they need to build long-lasting alliances fostered by personal contact between them. The conclusion is based on a review of cross-border work since the early 1990s.

The “Survey of Organizational Goals, Strategies and Practices,” conducted with the support of the Center for Latin American Studies at The University of Arizona, was administered to representatives of Mexican and U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community action groups participating in the 2003 Meeting on the Border Environment in Tijuana, Mexico. The border meeting was held in May 2003 and coordinated by the university and the nonprofit *Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental*.

During the past decade, Mexican and U.S. border groups and coalitions have employed various strategies to address border environmental, health, and economic problems. NGOs and community-based groups have not only increased in number since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) side accords; they also have demonstrated that they are crucial to focusing public opinion on and shifting political attitudes toward social, environmental, health, and economic conditions in the borderlands. As NGO observers and participants note, these organizations raise issues on the agendas of many border states; publicize the nature and seriousness of border problems; disseminate scientific research; organize and exert pressure on their respective countries, transnational companies, and international economic organizations such as the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC), North American Development Bank (NADB), and the World Trade Organization (WTO); as well as helping ensure effective implementation of binational agreements such as the environmental and labor side accords of NAFTA. (1), (2), (3), (4), (5)

Whether NGOs focus their membership, goals, and strategies locally along the border, form regional networks, transnational coalitions, or transnational social movements, they can “open up channels of communication and participation [and] provide training ground for activists promoting pluralism and human rights.” (6) As social movements, they “attempt to construct an alternative view of development and social practice through a self-conscious and localized political strategy.” (2) At the same time, NGOs and community groups frequently face the challenge of sustaining joint action on border issues. Consolidating cross-border partnerships is easier said than done. (3), (7)

With these challenges in mind, the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy designed an electronic questionnaire for participants in the border meeting to obtain answers to help bridge political, cultural, and geographic barriers and to open up discussion and reflection on environmental issues of common concern in the region. This year’s border meeting attracted more than 500 participants from both sides of the border, not only from nongovernmental and community organizations, but also from academic, government, and private sectors. A total of 66 surveys were sent out in English and Spanish to NGO representatives and 29 responses were returned, with a 38% response rate from the U.S. questionnaires and a 52% rate from the Mexican queries.

Survey forms were returned from a wide range of international, regional, and local organizations. The 14 respondents from Mexico come from 11 different organizations: two international organizations (Greenpeace and



World Wildlife Fund), and nine locally based NGOs. On the U.S. side, 15 survey responses were sent in from 11 institutions. Three national organizations, the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense, and the National Wildlife Federation were joined by eight local or regionally based organizations, including the Rio Grande-Rio Bravo Basin Coalition, and the Environmental Education Exchange based in Tucson, Ariz.

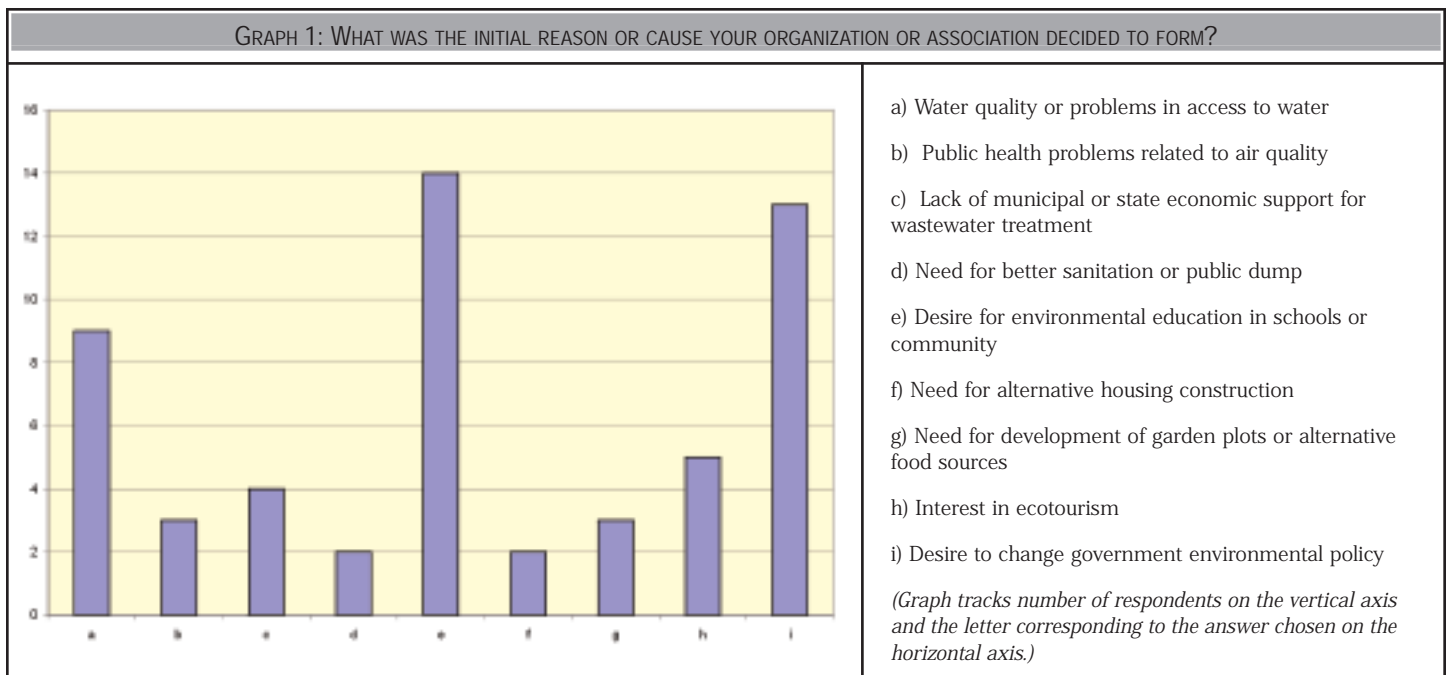
The purpose of the survey was to identify the factors, specifically organizational strategies and practices, that have contributed to the success of nongovernmental and community action groups in addressing environmental, health, and economic conditions in the borderlands. Another purpose was to continue a cross-border NGO information exchange in the spirit of the conference's objectives. The survey's goal was to provide an opportunity for these groups to articulate the challenges and opportunities they faced, in the hopes that this information would strengthen the implementation of their projects and programs in the borderlands.

In order to encourage a strong response rate, we limited the survey to 10 questions with multiple choices, including an "other" category for alternative responses. Frequently more than one choice was possible for an individual question. While complicating the statistical

analysis, this leeway allowed what we perceive as a more accurate assessment. The "other" category also opened up the possibility of responses that we had not considered but that were equally, if not more important, than the alternatives we had offered.

Initial Reason for Organizing

Forty-eight percent of the respondents (33% of Mexican and 64% of U.S. respondents) identified as their initial reason for organizing the desire for environmental education in schools or the community. (See Graph 1.) A close 46% were motivated by a desire to change government environmental policy. The third most common reason for the formation of both groups was water quality concerns or water access problems. Interestingly, Mexican respondents generally indicated more reasons for organizing than did the U.S. groups. The "other" comments supported and expanded on the three choices by drawing attention to the relationship between public health and the environment as a result of trade agreements, including *maquila* (factory) expansion, and herbicide use in agriculture. A few other respondents also considered their group's purpose to ensure government agency and corporate accountability in regard to environmental problems. Several others emphasized wildlife conservation and biodiversity as their entity's main goals.



Membership Selection

Fifty-five percent of both U.S. and Mexican groups selected email and phone calls as their first choice for soliciting membership. Letters were the second choice for both at 48%, although this is mainly due to U.S. preference. Both groups emphasized the importance of direct personal contact such as door-to-door visits, workshops, and other public events.

Funding Sources

Both U.S. and Mexican participants identified foundations as one of their main sources of funding (79%), with all U.S. participants selecting this choice. The second choice for both groups, at 65%, was private contributions from members. Only 24% considered universities as a source of funding. Forty-eight percent of the groups mentioned other NGOs. Twenty-one percent of the respondents added “government agencies,” namely the Environmental Protection Agency, under the “other” category, indicating that this was an important omission on the survey’s part. Several groups specifically mentioned developing programs under government contracts. All of the above were also mentioned as important sources of institutional collaboration for implementing goals. In addition, some mentioned developing allies and establishing a rapport with individuals in government agencies.

Lessons Learned about Working with Institutions, Other Agencies

Groups from both sides of the border (62%) recognized establishing a good working relationship as an import lesson in working with institutions and government agencies. We share some of their comments:

“Establish relationships that respect and allow for differences in opinion.”

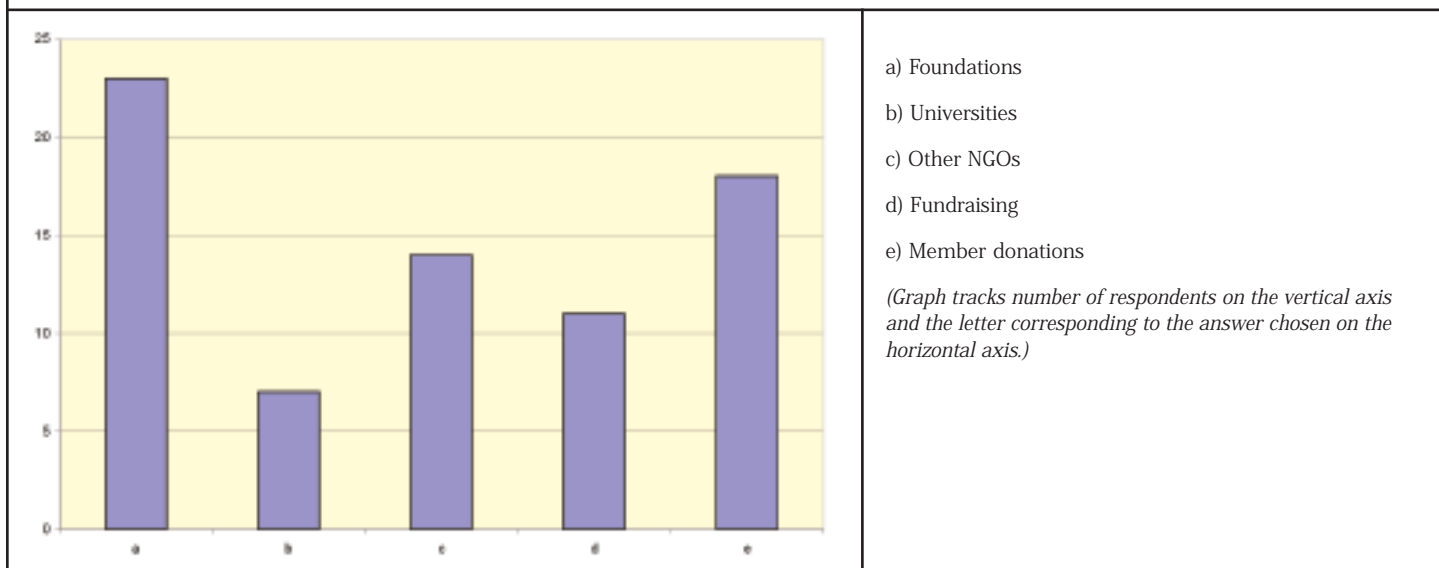
“For those working binationally, Mexican partners have limited resources, so it is most effective to establish good communication and working relationship, especially in regards to sharing information.”

“Develop LASTING relationships among individuals. Build in sustainability for projects—have a shared vision for how projects and relationships will extend into the future.”

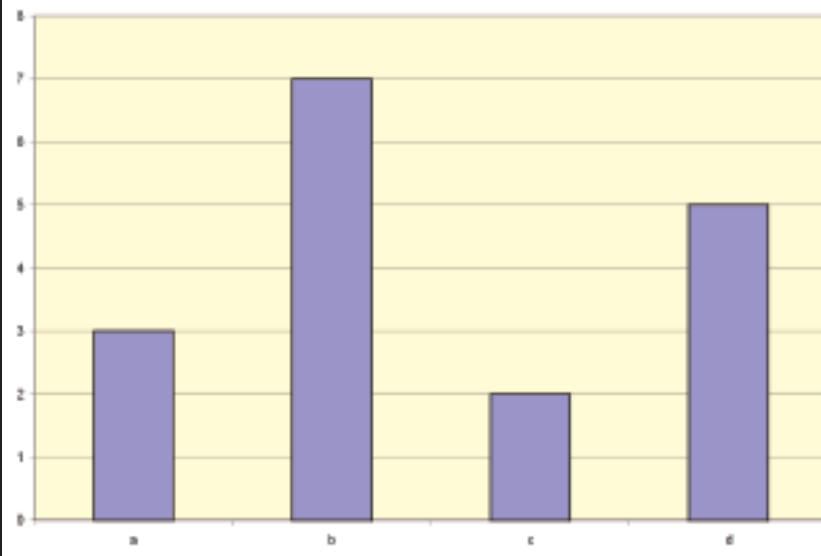
Greatest Challenge to Maintaining Membership Cohesion

There were no strong trends in this category except for an agreement that “establishing a clear sense of mission” (28%) was the most frequent choice. (See Graph 3.) The least important challenge (7%) was obtaining consensus on membership qualifications. Mexican groups gave equal importance to “finishing projects” as to “establishing a clear understanding of mission.” The “other” category produced some interesting suggestions: “Maintain diverse representation in membership at the same time

GRAPH 2: WHERE DOES FUNDING FOR YOUR PROJECTS AND ORGANIZATION COME FROM?



GRAPH 3: WHAT IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE TO YOUR NGO IN MAINTAINING MEMBERSHIP COHESION?



- a) Obtaining consensus on membership qualifications
- b) Establishing a clear understanding of mission
- c) Deciding on strategies to carry out mission
- d) Getting members to carry out or finish projects

(Graph tracks number of respondents on the vertical axis and the letter corresponding to the answer chosen on the horizontal axis.)

as a consensus,” and “Obtain sufficient funding sources, especially ones that don’t distract [the group] from its mission.”

Advice to New Border NGOs about Organizational Structure

“Seek funding as soon as the mission is established” was the first choice at 46%, which is consistent with the previous comments on the greatest challenge in maintaining membership cohesion. A close second choice for the U.S. respondents was using a facilitator to help establish mission, strategies, and projects, and, for the Mexican groups, agreeing on a decisionmaking process. Again, the “other” category produced a number of suggestions consistent with responses to earlier questions:

“[It’s] important to have clear and agreed-upon goals and objectives”

“[Get] training and strengthen the NGO”

“If you think you want to grow and raise funds, adopt a board structure now, and follow the standard rules for board decisionmaking.”

“Invest the time to build relationships that will serve as your collaborative network.”

“A clear vision is very important.”

“[Establish] funding and strategies (coordinate political activities) like a town council.”

“Create structure appropriate to the level of the organization. Don’t wear yourself out maintaining structure.”

“Acknowledge the common bond and mission that brings individuals together to form the organization, and clearly articulate that mission.”

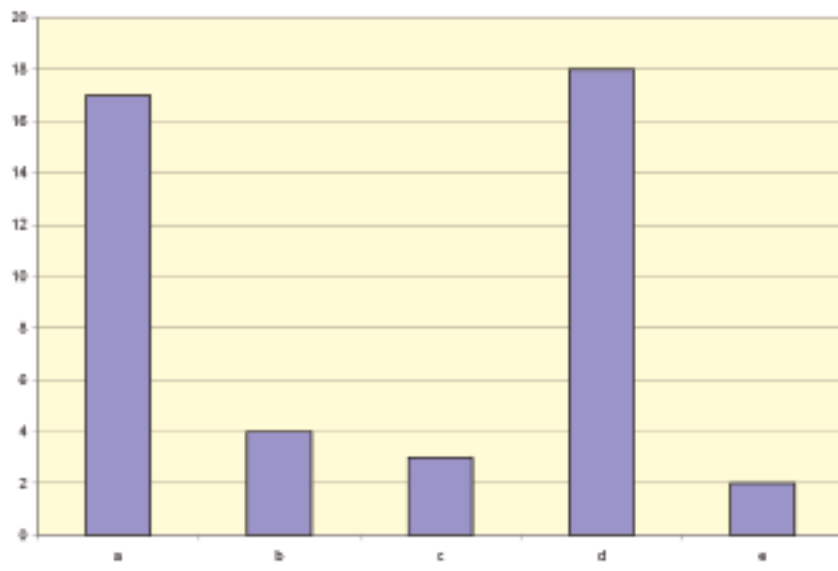
Types of Projects or Programs that Have Helped Organizations Accomplish Goals

Media campaign was the most frequent choice at 70%, while community or school environmental workshops was a close second choice at 65%. “Other” comments included lobbying (legislative advocacy), participating in the political process, and lawsuits or litigation when necessary.

Successful Strategies in Implementing Policy Changes

Responses in this section provided a link for some groups to the previous question on projects and programs. The top response by a small margin was “public forums and conferences” at 72% of respondents. “Media-information campaigns” was chosen at a close second, at 70% of respondents. Letters to public officials was also a common strategy, at 62%. “Other” comments suggested additional strategies: “Letters to political officials are very important, but so also are visits in person,” and “Present scientific information to help decisionmakers.” The best strategy has been “to make presentations

GRAPH 4: WHICH TYPES OF PROJECTS OR PROGRAMS HAVE MOST HELPED YOUR ORGANIZATION TO ACCOMPLISH ITS GOALS?



- a) Community or school environmental workshops
- b) Riparian restoration projects
- c) Trash cleanup projects
- d) Media campaign
- e) Construction/maintenance of greenhouse

(Graph tracks number of respondents on the vertical axis and the letter corresponding to the answer chosen on the horizontal axis.)

personally or at conferences to government officials in both Mexico and the United States.” Still others sought change indirectly through education, as in this example: “We aspire to increase the capacity of individuals to make wise choices, whether they be political or personal.”

Organizational Evaluation of Mission, Goals

Mexican and U.S. respondents (71%) selected “evaluation or assessment meetings with members” as the most common means (70%) for evaluating mission and goals. Mexican organizations selected “written evaluation by outside agency” as their second choice, while U.S. groups were tied over “evaluation checklist by participants” and “community feedback.” “Other” comments provided specific suggestions on how to evaluate:

- “Use prior established evaluation criteria.”
- “Measure progress against benchmarks.”
- “Monitor performance and impacts with indicators.”
- “Measure by continued service request, enduring relationships, and longevity in the region.”

Conclusions

The NGO border meeting survey responses indicate the importance of establishing long-lasting allies and coalitions through personal contact in order to effect changes in environmental, health, or economic conditions along the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of the respondents have been working for more than a decade and so are well qualified to evaluate lasting strategies. As Environmental Defense attorney Mary Kelly noted, these NGOs “combine a solid grounding in the issues with a longer-term vision, and a high proportion of them [including Mexican NGOs struggling with economic hardship] have remained with the work beyond what one normally expects in the NGO arena.” (7)

Whether their strategies are aimed at government officials or individuals within border communities, direct communication appears to be essential in order to initiate change. Along with the emphasis on good communication comes the suggestion that facilitation skills are useful in selecting a group’s mission, goals, and strategies, and perhaps in helping a group carry out projects. This emphasis on communication skills and facilitation may be an offshoot of the environmental conflict resolution process that started in the United States and spread across the border in the late 1990s.

Even though funding for border NGOs and nonprofits has been limited, some funding for border environmental work has been available to the *Red Fronterizo de Salud y Medio Ambiente*, *Fundación Ecológica Mexicana*, *Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental*, and *COSYDDHAC* (a human rights organization in Chihuahua). At the same time, groups such as the Environmental Health Coalition and the Texas Center for Policy Studies have had some grant money for Mexican border groups (Kelly 2002b: 137). One of the challenges for U.S. groups is finding funding that will allow them to collaborate with Mexican partners.

While this survey did not attempt to establish the extent of U.S.-Mexico coalitions or alliances, the border meeting and the survey responses suggest that forming cross-border linkages continues to be a good strategy for implementing change and addressing the challenges of funding. A survey in the late 1980s found that 73% of 40 environmental NGOs interviewed had foreign contacts, 33% received counseling, 28% information, and 33% financial support (Wiemman, et al, 1991: 139). While the organizational challenges may remain somewhat the same for today's NGOs, these groups appear to be in a better position to address problems related to the trade and development agenda, partly because they have become more familiar with working with each other and partly because both the U.S. and Mexican governments have turned to the private sector as a way to increase local responsibility for solving border problems and for implementing state-designed policies and services.

International development policy researcher Laura Tedesco even claims that the neoliberal state has retreated from its role as the agent of development and is handing over environmental, health, and economic problems

to NGOs as a means of addressing the current crises (Tedesco 1999: 131). However, the increased presence of NGOs and nonprofits along the U.S.-Mexico border can also represent an increased level of grassroots or regional activity supported by governmental or other funding. There are approximately 395 environmental education-related NGOs alone in the Environmental Education Exchange *Border Resource Guide* and over 1,000 in the Americas Program *Border Organization Directory*. (8), (9)

A third period in the bilateral border relationship, which can be considered the NAFTA phase, was initiated by the two new administrations of U.S. President George Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox in 2000.

This phase, according to Kelly, "offers real opportunities for progress, given the stronger framework for federal, state, local, and NGO cross-border cooperation developed in the early post-NAFTA phase." However, she also notes that there are "high-stakes challenges ahead, which will require resolution, not just goodwill and dialogue." Certainly the continued survival of the periodic border

meeting, as well as collaboration, rather than competition for funding, can strengthen the resolution necessary for effective action on environmental, health, and economic issues in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. At an individual NGO level, border activists need to continue to address the linguistic, cultural, and other differences that make binational work a challenge.

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ENDNOTES

- (1) Brooks, David, and Jonathan Fox. 2002. "Movements Across the Border: An Overview." In *Cross-Border Dialogues: U.S.-Mexico Social Movement Networking*, eds. David Brooks and Jonathan Fox (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California).
- (2) Escobar, Arturo. 1998. "Whose Knowledge, Whose Nature? Biodiversity, Conservation, and the Political Ecology of Social Movements." *Journal of Political Ecology*.
- (3) Fox, Jonathan. 2002. "Lessons from Mexico-U.S. Civil Society Coalitions," in *Cross-Border Dialogues: US-Mexico Social Movement Networking*, eds. David Brooks and Jonathan Fox (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California).
- (4) Kelly, Mary E. 2002. "The Border Environment and the Changing Bilateral Relationship." *Enfoque* (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California).
- (5) Torres, Blanca. 1997. "Transnational Environmental NGOs: Linkages and Impact on Policy." In *Latin American Environmental Policy in International Perspective*, eds. Gordan J. MacDonald, Daniel L. Nielson, and Marc A. Stern (Boulder: Westview Press).
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- (7) Kelly, Mary E. 2002. "Cross-Border Work on the Environment: Evolution, Successes, Problems, and Future Outlook." In *Cross-Border Dialogues: U.S.-Mexico Social Movement Networking*, eds. David Brooks and Jonathan Fox (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California).
- (8) Environmental Education Exchange. 2000. *Border Environmental Education Resource Guide*. U.S. EPA and World Wildlife Fund.
- (9) Americas Program. *Border Organization Directory 2003*. <http://www.americaspolicy.org/borderlines/action-kit.html>.

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